

Translating colour: the case of Manette Salomon

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TRANSLATING COLOUR: THE CASE OF *MANETTE SALOMON*

When the Goncourt brothers' art novel *Manette Salomon* was first published in 1867, Alphonse Duchesne, critic for *Le Figaro*, commented: "Votre livre n'est pas une série de chapitres, mais bien une galerie de tableaux. Telle de vos pages est un Delacroix, telle autre un Decamps. Vous avez des Géricault et vous avez des Meissonier" (Goncourt 1996, 557).¹

The Goncourt brothers had a genuine affinity for the visual arts. They cultivated close friendships with artists such as draughtsman and watercolourist Paul Gavarni, they were avid art collectors and were also amateur artists themselves. Even though Jules de Goncourt received no formal artistic education, he practiced watercolour and etching and produced some memorable works such as *The Bal Mabille*.² The Goncourt brothers wrote extensively about a wide range of artistic subjects: for example historical accounts of eighteenth-century French art, an introduction to Japanese art as well as contemporary art criticism. They developed a rich literary palette and a very personal form of pictorial writing: "*l'écriture artiste*".³

If we consider pictorial writing as an intersemiotic translation (Jakobson 79), that is, a translation from one sign system to another, the central problem of pictorial writing is to find the most satisfactory equivalence between the visual and literary codes. Colour, because of its intrinsically visual nature, is one of the Goncourt brothers' main challenges in this translation process. We propose to explore here the Goncourts' "*écriture artiste*" in their art novel *Manette Salomon* and to see why and how they translate colour and how colours are used in their text. Are colours for the Goncourts gratuitous or do they produce meaning? Are they expressive colours? Are colours connected to nature or at odds with it, are they a complement to literary

¹ "Your book isn't a series of chapters but rather an art gallery. One of your pages is a Delacroix, another one a Decamps. You have Gericaults and you have Meissoniers." All the translations in this article are by the author.

² Pen, ink and watercolour on paper; located in the Musée Carnavalet, Paris, France.

³ Edmond de Goncourt first used this term in the preface of *Les Frères Zemganno* (1879) to differentiate the Goncourt brother's take on realism from Zola's. "Le Réalisme, pour user du mot bête, du mot drapeau, n'a pas en effet l'unique mission de décrire ce qui est bas, ce qui est répugnant, ce qui pue, il est venu au monde aussi, lui, pour définir dans de l'écriture *artiste*, ce qui est élevé, ce qui est joli, ce qui sent bon [...]" ("Realism, to use this silly word, the flag word, doesn't have as its only goal to describe what is low, what is disgusting, what stinks, it also came to the world to define through *écriture artiste*, what is elevated, what is pretty, what smells nice [...]" (Goncourt 1879, VIII).

“realist illusion” (Mitterand 1994). We will first analyse how the Goncourt brothers use colour as a visible trace of the integration of painterly processes in their writing practice. We will then consider how their use of expressive colour constitutes a move away from realism towards literary and visual modernism. We will then see how they translate colours using synaesthesia in their writing to convey, evoke, replace or enhance sight with other senses.⁴

Colours as marks of the painterly influences on the writing process

Edmond de Goncourt noted in his *Journal*: “Je voudrais trouver des touches de phrases semblables à des touches de peintre dans une esquisse : des effleurements et des caresses et, pour ainsi dire, des glacis de la chose écrite qui échapperaient à la lourde, massive, bêtasse syntaxe des corrects grammairiens” (Goncourt 1989, II, 932).⁵ This quest for a perfect pictorialist writing was at the heart of the Goncourt’s writing practice. They used colour in different ways to mark the painterly influences on their “*écriture artiste*”: their choices of colour juxtapositions were visually motivated; they also used colour as a compositional device to structure ekphrasis; and finally the materiality of colour was used to create textural variations.

Discussions on colour juxtaposition, contrast and complementarity were essential to the development of nineteenth-century French painting. The debate opposing the inherent colour of an object – colour as substance – to secondary colour (transformed by context and lighting) was particularly important in this context (Gage 1993, 192). At that time, artists such as the Barbizon painters, whom the Goncourt brothers highly regarded, were exploring light effects in nature and showing how the character and colours of a landscape were entirely transformed by changes in context and lighting. Michel Eugène Chevreul’s theories, particularly those relating to the juxtaposition of contrasting colours were also popular (Bomford 1990, 79-80). At the time, the issue of perception of colour and its transferability into painting was at the heart of artistic practice as well as critical and scientific debates. Interestingly, when the Goncourts composed their descriptions, they seemed to use such visual

⁴ We don’t propose here to discuss the issue of the English translation of French terms. As underlined by John Lyons “not all languages are isomorphic” (Lyons 1995, 200) and the issues of equivalence for colours in diverse languages is beyond the scope of this article. The author has therefore chosen to provide a translation of the French text as literal and close to the original as possible.

⁵ “I would like to find strokes of sentences similar to a painter’s brushstrokes in a sketch: grazes and caresses, that is to say written glazes that would escape the heavy, massive, silly syntax of the correct grammarians.”

strategies. For example they describe the city of Adramiti as “[...] une ville où tout est rose, bleu clair, cendre verte, lilas tendre” (Goncourt 1996, 122-123).⁶ The juxtaposition of pink and baby blue and ash green and tender lilac follows Chevreul’s theories. These colours are approximately opposed on the colour wheel and, if it were a painting, the juxtaposition of the colours would lead them to vibrate and come to life. When composing their text the Goncourts applied the colour rules dominating the artistic scene at the time. The colours here are a mark of the influence of painting on their writing.

Furthermore, in their *ekphrases* the Goncourts used language referring to colour to compose their imaginary painting, to add layers after layers of paint: “Sa seconde toile faisait voir une vue d’Adramiti. D’une touche fraîche et légère, avec des tons de fleurs, la palette d’un vrai bouquet, Coriolis avait jeté sur la toile le riant éblouissement de ce morceau de ciel tout bleu, de ces baroques maisons blanches, de ces galeries vertes, rouges, de ces costumes éclatants, de ces flaques d’eau où semblent croupir de l’azur noyé” (Goncourt 1996, 237).⁷ The Goncourt brothers start by laying out their colours on the palette, focusing the attention of their reader on the painterly process. Their imaginary painter is then described painting the background of blue sky, the white houses in the foreground, then adding here and there highlights of colours to play with the contrasts. By describing the painting in this way, and using colours as a compositional device, the Goncourt brothers mimic the process of painting. They simultaneously involve the viewer in the creative process of their imaginary character and anchored their “*écriture artiste*” as a pictorial writing practice.

The Goncourts also used the material aspect of colour, the texture of paint. In the mid-nineteenth-century, painters such as Théodore Rousseau or Narcisse-Virgile Díaz de la Peña used the materiality of paint to create new effects. The use of the materiality of paint contrasted drastically with the slick application of paint at the Academy. To the Goncourts, a painting’s merit laid not in the narrative it presented, but purely in its sensuous qualities. To them, art was meant for the eyes as a “[...]”

⁶ “[...] a city where all is pink, baby blue, ash green, tender lilac.”

⁷ “His second painting was a view of Adramiti. With a light and fresh brushstroke, with floral tones, and a bouquet of a palette, Coriolis threw on the canvas the smiling dazzle of this blue piece of sky, of these baroque white houses, of those green and red arcades, of those sparkling costumes, of those puddles of water where drowned azure seemed to stagnate [...]”

récréation du nerf optique” (Goncourt 1980, 206).⁸ When they describe the painting *Café Turc*, colours are merged with textural qualities:

En revenant au souvenir de ce Café turc dont il s’était rempli les yeux à l’exposition pendant une demi-heure, il rappela à Chassagnol cette bande de ciel ouaté de blanc, martelé d’azur, sur lequel semblait trembler un tulle rose ; ces petits arbres buissonneux, pareils à des massifs de rosiers sauvages, le cône des ifs, des cyprès noirs percés de jours, cette rondeur d’une coupole, la ligne des terrasses, ce rayon vibrant sur des plâtres tachés du velours des mousses, ces murs ayant des tons de peau de serpent séchée et comme des écailles de reptile, ce craquelé de la muraille chatoyant sous les traînées du pinceau, l’égrenage du ton, l’émail de la pâte, les gouttelettes de couleur huileuse, les tons coulant en larmes de bougie [...] (Goncourt 1996, 401).⁹

Their description starts with colours associated with notions of materiality. Words such as “ouaté”, “martelé” and “tulle” evoke specific textures and the way in which each colour catches the light. John Gage has shown that for some artists the articulation of variation of colours relies on “very subtle textural variations” (Gage 1995, 185). In the rest of the description colours are even replaced by texture. The materiality of paint when it creates moss, snakeskin, cracks, paste, oily drops and candle tears evokes strong textural references and influences how the colour is perceived. The reader is invited to transgress the visual world to touch colours and contemplate how a similar tone with diverse textures creates visual variations. The Goncourts’ interest in the materiality of colour was shared with late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century painters. The Goncourt brothers’ use of colour – juxtaposing contrasting colours, using colours as a composition device and emphasising the textural dimension of colour – is a tangible mark of painterly influences on their writing process.

⁸ “[...] recreation of the optical nerve.”

⁹ “Coming back to that memory of this Turkish cafe with which he filled his eyes at the exhibition during half an hour he reminded Chassagnol of this stretch of sky quilted by white, hammered out of azure on which a pink piece of tulle seemed to shiver; those short bushy trees that looked like clumps of wild roses, the cones of the yews, the black cypresses pierced with daylight, this roundness of a dome, the line of the terraces, this vibrating ray on the plasters stained by velvet moss, those walls with their dried snakeskin tones and as if they were a reptile’s scales, this cracking of the thick wall shimmering under the trail of the brush, the decomposition of the tone, the enamel of the paste, the droplets of oily colour, the tones flowing as a candle’s tears [...].”

Using expressive colour: towards modernism

The Goncourt brothers' interest in the materiality of paintings, their fight against academic beauty and literary painting, as well as their choice of modern landscape as the achievement of modern art were a major step towards the establishment of modern art (Vouilloux 1997, 27-28). Colours in the Goncourts' texts were never gratuitous, and regardless of whether or not they referred to reality, they contributed to the production of meaning. The Goncourts often used colours to complete their descriptions and to transcend the literary codes to stimulate the reader into creating a mental image that invoked, for example, a specific mood or rhythm.

The Goncourts were known to use colours to qualify the literary production of their friend Gustave Flaubert: *Salambô* was "[...] la grosse couleur presque l'enluminure" (Goncourt 1989, I, 692) whereas *Mme Bovary* was grey.¹⁰ Colours to them were closely associated with mood and they were used to convey this in the art novel. A letter from the fictional painter Coriolis to his friend Anatole from *Adramiti* reads: "Figure-toi que ton ami habite une ville où tout est rose, bleu clair, cendre verte, lilas tendre... Rien que des couleurs gaies qui font : pif! paf! dans les yeux dès qu'il y a un peu de soleil. [...] Enfin, c'est éblouissant! Et je me fais l'effet d'être logé dans la vitrine des pierres précieuses au musée de minéralogie" (Goncourt 1996, 122-123).¹¹ The reference to colours coupled with the exclamations "pif! paf! dans les yeux" conveys the excitement of the painter, his happiness is linked directly to the light and joyful pastel colours described. With colours, the Goncourt brothers created a sort of non-discursive symbolism that enriched their poetic prose.

Liliane Louvel has shown that tones, rhythm and speed are essential tools in the translation from the visual realm to the literary realm and that equivalences could be found there (Louvel 2002, 12). The Goncourts also used colour as a rhythmical device to mark the passing of time. While Coriolis looks at a Japanese album "[...] il se perdait dans cet azur où se noyaient les floraisons rose des arbres, dans cet email bleu sertissant les fleurs de neige des pêchers et des amandiers, dans ces grands couchers de soleil cramoisis et d'où partent les rayons d'une roue de sang, dans la splendeur des astres écornés par le vol des grues voyageuses" (Goncourt

¹⁰ "[...] the fat colour, almost illumination."

¹¹ "Imagine that your friend lives in a city where all is pink, baby blue, ash green, tender lilac... Only happy colours that go: pif! paf! in the eyes as soon as there is a bit of sunshine. [...] It's dazzling! And I feel like I live in the precious stones' window at the mineralogy museum."

1996, 261).¹² Instead of focusing on the process of painting they insist here on particularities of Japanese prints: strong contrasts and bright colours. In each evocation of a different print one coloured contrast succeeds to the next. It is the rhythmical power of colours, the passing from one colour contrast to another that partitions time and creates a rhythm.

The use of colour as expressing emotion, rhythm and speed, rather than purely descriptive colour, goes beyond the realm of the realistic use of colour. It can be interpreted as opening the way to modernism with its focus on rhythm and abstraction of human feeling. The Goncourts' definition of painting as "un art matérialiste, vivifiant la forme par la couleur [...]" (Goncourt 1855, 6) and their use of colour in their "*écriture artiste*" seem to take them towards a modernist interpretation of art rather than anchoring them in the Realist tradition.¹³

Synaesthesia

Even though mechanical colour organs had existed since the eighteenth century, it was not until the beginning of the nineteenth century that the first medical descriptions of synaesthesia appeared. The growing interest in synaesthesia in nineteenth-century Europe can be seen in E.T.A. Hoffmann's short stories, Charles Baudelaire's "correspondences" theory or the increasing popularity of colour pianos (Gage, 2006, 185-186). With their "*écriture artiste*" the Goncourt brothers pursued the agenda set by Baudelaire in his poem "Les Correspondances". In the poem, Baudelaire proposes to seek, as Gage puts it "[...] synesthetic links between perfumes, colours and sounds" (Gage 186). For the Goncourts colour was never an isolated element; rather, it tended to merge with other sensations. In their *Journal* they state that "La peinture, rien autre chose qu'un chatouillement physique de l'œil [...]" (Goncourt 1989, I, 350).¹⁴ The Goncourts saw painting as a vehicle for physical sensation.

To translate colours, the Goncourts sometimes used synaesthetic descriptions to try to overcome the issues of equivalence raised by intersemiotic translation. In his study on Théophile Gautier's pictorial writing techniques, Peter White underlined that:

¹² "He got lost in this azure where pink tree blossoms drowned, in this blue enamel setting the snowy flowers of the peach-trees and the almond-trees, in those great crimson sunsets from which go the rays of a bloody wheel, in the splendor of the stars whose corners were chipped by the flight of traveling cranes."

¹³ "a materialist art, stimulating form through colour [...]"

¹⁴ "Painting, nothing more than the physical tickling of the eye [...]"

“L’emploi de la référence artistique semble provenir d’une insuffisance fondamentale du discours romanesque [...]. Il manque à l’écrivain la plastique des formes ; ce sera donc par la comparaison qu’il dépassera les limites de la fiction et nous rendra des effets visuels plus immédiats, et ses textes s’en trouveront enrichis” (White 283-284).¹⁵ But beyond comparisons, the Goncourts sought to convey colours through reconstituted multi-sensory experiences, synaesthetic experiences.

In *Manette Salomon* colour is sometimes expressed by smell, with colours not named but evoked. For example when they describe the body of work of imaginary landscape artist Crescent, who is most likely based on Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot and/or other Barbizon school painters, they replace the visual component by olfactory sensations: “[...] sa peinture faisait respirer le bois, l’herbe mouillée, la terre des champs crevassée à grosses mottes, la chaleur et, comme dit le paysan, le *touffo* d’une belle journée, la fraîcheur d’une rivière, l’ombre d’un chemin creux : elle avait des parfums, des *frangances*, des haleines” (Goncourt 1996, 361).¹⁶ The painting, which for them is essentially forms and colours on a canvas, is described here solely by its evocative power. Colour is replaced by sensations of temperature, humidity and smell. For instance, the colour green is evoked through the smell of the forest and wet grass, the browns through the breath of the cracked clods in the fields. Landscapes, which are for them “la victoire de l’art moderne” (Goncourt 1855, 18), become the terrain of synaesthetic experiences and colours become part of multisensory correspondences.¹⁷

In some other instances the description of colour is complemented by other senses to try and express it in the most precise physical way. For example their description of skin colour is here enriched and even saturated with other sensory feelings:

Ses yeux se perdaient sur cette coloration si riche et si fine, ces passages de tons si doux, si variés, si nuancés, que tant de peintres expriment et croient idéaliser avec un rose banal et plat ; ils embrassaient ces fugitives transparences, ces tendresses et ces

¹⁵ “The use of artistic reference seems to come from a fundamental insufficiency of the novels’ mode of discourse. [...] The writer lacks the plasticity of forms; it is with the help of comparison that he goes beyond the limits of fiction and that he gives the reader more instantaneous visual effects and his texts are richer for it.”

¹⁶ “His work had you breathing in the forest, the wet grass, the earth of cracked fields with big clods, the heat and as the peasant says, the *touffo* of a beautiful day, the freshness of a river, the shade of a sunken path: it had perfumes, fragrances, breaths.”

¹⁷ “the victory of modern art.”

tiédeurs de couleurs qui ne sont plus qu'à peine des couleurs, ces imperceptibles apparences d'un bleu, d'un vert presque insensible, ombrant d'une adorable pâleur les diaphanéités laiteuses de la chair, tout ce délicieux je-ne-sais-quoi de l'épiderme de la femme, qu'on dirait fait avec le dessous de l'aile des colombes, l'intérieur des roses blanches, la glauque transparence de l'eau baignant un corps." (Goncourt 1996, 273)¹⁸

The indication that pink is not a precise enough equivalent – either pictorial or literary – to skin colour announces their project and underlines the difficulty of the translation of this colour. The authors proceed to convey a whole range of feelings emanating from the colour: a visual feeling with the transparencies, an emotional one with the mention of tenderness and a physical one with the evocation of warmth. They use the technique of the painter himself, layering glazes of subtle colours to convey its nuances: dabs of blue, dabs of green, dabs of milky white. Furthermore, they take the description and associate this colour with other senses. "[...] Le dessous de l'aile des colombes [...]" evokes touch as well as colour, "[...] l'intérieur des roses blanches [...]" makes use of the sense of smell and touch to complement colour and the final "[...] la glauque transparence de l'eau baignant un corps [...]" the reader associates the colour with a physical sensation: the warm bath, the softness of the water. Without withdrawing the evocation of colour that is present in the wing of the dove, the white rose and the bath water, they enhance it. They saturate the colour with sensation and transcend the visual component of colour to make it physically palpable for the reader. The Goncourt brothers throughout their art novel adopted this strategy to enrich their palette.

Using synaesthetic means, the Goncourt brothers showed that real colour is not unambiguous and stable in itself; rather, it is tied to a plethora of other sensations and associations. They showed that painting itself is limited in its capacity to convey elusive colours and that literature has indeed the means to try and express subtle nuances of colour through its power of evocation.

¹⁸ "His eyes were getting lost on this colour so rich and so fine, those tonal passages so soft, so varied, so nuanced, that many painters express and think to idealise with a flat and banal pink; they embraced those fugitive transparencies, this tenderness and warmth of colours that are barely colours anymore, those imperceptible appearances of an almost invisible blue or green that shades with a lovely paleness the milky diaphaneity of the flesh, all this delicious je-ne-sais-quoi of a woman's skin that looks like it has been made of the underside of a dove's wing, the inside of a white rose, the bluish green transparencies of the water bathing a body."

Conclusion: the limits of translation: unnameable and unpaintable colour

In *Manette Salomon* the Goncourt brothers enhanced the sight of colour with other senses. They also used colour to express a mood, mimic the process of painting and as a rhythmical device. Throughout their novel they questioned the limitation of an artistic translation of the world. The Goncourt brothers, even though they were some of the keenest synaesthetic writers of their century, were aware of the limitation of the translation between the world, words and images. They realised that when words fail so too do the images, as evidenced by their description of the Bosphore and its water: “[...] le Bosphore, les îles, la côte de Troie, blanche, avec des éclats de carrière de marbre, étincelante dans ce bleu, le bleu du ciel et de la mer mêlés, un bleu pour lequel il n’y a ni mots ni couleur, un bleu qui serait une turquoise translucide, vois-tu cela?” (Goncourt 1996, 158).¹⁹ Some colours for them reach the limits of what art can express. Paint and words are incapable of rendering this colour and the result of the equivalence is an approximation by comparison; the use of an oxymoron leaves the writer/painter with a feeling of uncertainty as to the success of his evocation. Unnameable colours are of particular interest in the context of the colour-order system prevalent in the late-nineteenth century where one had come to expect a name for every colour (Gage, 2006, 141). John Lyons stresses that “among the 180 or so higher-level or more specialised ‘principales couleurs’ listed in Le Grand Robert, [...] we find the delightfully evocative *cuisse de nymphe* (a shade of pink, literally translated as ‘[colour of a] nymph’s thigh’, Lyons, 1995, 207). In such a context, the failure of words seems to have been difficult for them to accept.

However to the Goncourts this was not a problem of equivalence specific to literature. It was not only a problem for intersemiotic translation, it was also a problem if one translated from visual codes to visual codes as this remark by their fictional painter shows: “Seulement il y a un embêtement, – ne le dis pas à ces animaux de critiques, c’est que c’est si beau, si brillant, si éclatant, si au-dessus de ce que nous avons dans nos boîtes à couleurs, qu’il vous prend par moments un découragement qui coupe le travail en deux” (Goncourt 1996, 124).²⁰ The limits to the representation of colour are not specific to writing but shared between all arts. Colour sometimes

¹⁹ “The Bosphore, the islands, the Trojan coast, white, with bursts of marble quarry, blazing in this blue, the blue of the sea and the sky merged, a blue for which there are no words nor colours, a blue that would be a transparent turquoise, can you picture this?”

²⁰ “Except there is a problem, - don’t say a word to those animals of critics, it is so beautiful, so bright, so sparkling, so much above anything we have in our painting boxes, that sometime you get discouraged so badly that it cuts the work in half.”

escapes equivalence even within pictorialist writing and the problem that remains is how approximate the equivalent offered is. Finding the equivalent of a colour in image or text was for the Goncourt brothers at the very limit of the creative powers of both the artist and the writer.

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